Memories of a Delhi gone by: DDA's oldest housing colony near Hauz Khas, where flats once cost Rs 20k, may be up for revamp

The earliest residents of Bhim Nagri Apartments, built by the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) in Hauz Khas, moved into their homes in 1969.

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Located in Hauz Khas, Bhim Nagri Apartments is the oldest housing complex built by the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) in the National Capital, with its earliest residents moving into their homes in 1969. (Express photo)

"We used to play badminton together, sing songs, and eat with each other," says Mohini Judge, 84, one of the oldest residents of Bhim Nagri Apartments, as she remembers a time that was "much simpler, when this was a community. We were so close that if someone didn't come down for a festival, we used to go into their houses and wake them up."

Located in Hauz Khas, Bhim Nagri Apartments is the oldest housing complex built by the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) in the National Capital, with its earliest residents moving into their homes in 1969. The first of the quintessential DDA flats – winning the lottery for which has long been a mark of prestige, though it is steadily eroding of late – remains tucked inside the tony Safdarjung Development Area (SDA). Hemmed in on both sides by villas quickly transforming into monolithic glass-and-steel builder flats, Bhim Nagri stands like an island relatively untouched by the winds of change rushing through Delhi.

The DDA's attempt to create a well-planned and green Capital, while seldom successful across Delhi, is visible here with three parks interspersed with buildings in the society. (Express photo)

A joint government-industry task force, constituted by Lieutenant Governor V K Saxena, recently submitted a report titled 'How to Revitalise Delhi' to the government,

recommending ways to unlock the region's "latent real estate potential." Among its key recommendations is the redevelopment of housing societies older than 50 years, which will also cover Bhim Nagri. "These buildings are likely to have significant structural issues and may not meet modern safety and infrastructure standards," the report recommends.

Rs 5,000 down payment for flats costing Rs 20,000

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Judge was 32 when she moved into one of the 72 flats housed in the eight buildings of Bhim Nagri, and her daughter was just a year old. "When I used to go to the market, I would leave her at the church nearby without any worry," Judge says, harking back to a time when residents say they had a small but strong community. "I remember Sonu running around the houses, with his mother chasing and calling him back," Judge adds about Sandeep Behl, another original inhabitant of the society.

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"At that time, most of us knew each other and people used to live in large joint families," says Behl, who is also the general secretary of the Residents' Welfare Association (RWA). But over time, most of the earliest inhabitants moved out, selling or leasing out their flats. "The newer people are not that interested in socialising with everyone else," he adds.

Behl remembers that his family had to make a down payment of Rs 5,000 for the Middle-Income Group (MIG) flat and pay monthly instalments of Rs 200 for seven years, making the cost of the flat approximately Rs 20,000. MIG flats today can cost between Rs 50 lakh to Rs 1.5 crore.

The DDA's attempt to create a well-planned and green Capital, while seldom successful across Delhi, is visible here with three parks interspersed with buildings in the society. But Judge says it came later. "Earlier, the spaces between buildings were just vacant. It was all an open area with hard soil. The parks came in around 1975."

Solid construction amid greenery

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"We could also see the Qutub Minar from here in those days as the sky was clear and there were no tall buildings. Now, because of the pollution, you can't see it," Judge's daughter says. "There were also small sparrows back then, which one can't see now because there are so many Wi-Fi poles around," she adds.

The DDA's attempt to create a well-planned and green Capital, while seldom successful across Delhi, is visible here with three parks interspersed with buildings in the society. (Express photo)

While the colony is currently not surrounded by high-end markets with expensive shops, residents remember a time when they started coming up. Behl says that keekar trees stood where Aurobindo Market is now, and the SDA Market started coming up in the 1990s. Judge also recollects a time when Evergreen was not the massive sweets shop it is at present, but a small store. "I remember when they used to fry samosas and jalebis in the open. They knew all of us and would call us over: "Aao aao bhabhi!"

Compared to contemporary DDA residences, where homeowners are often seen complaining about substandard material and poor planning, residents here sing praises about the construction. "These walls are rock solid. We can't even put nails in them using just a hammer. You need a drilling machine," says Behl. "Bricks were not used for the construction of the outer walls. All of them were pre-fabricated," says V S Sarma, another old-timer who remembers the exact date he moved into his flat: January 29, 1969.

All the buildings were the same colour at first, residents say, with Behl remembering them as grey while Sarma contends they were yellow. Today, the buildings are of different colours: some are yellow, some white, others brown. "It was like the coming of Eastmancolor, with black and white turning into various hues," Sarma says, comparing it to the technology used in the 1950s and 1960s to bring out movies and photographs in colour.